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DID CABOT RETURN FROM HIS SECOND VOYAGE?

THIS important question of maritime history acquires additional interest from a document recently discovered in the archives of Westminster Abbey.

It is well known that John Cabot, by virtue of letters patent granted to him and his three sons by Henry VII., equipped a small vessel, and with a crew of eighteen men, sailed from Bristol in the spring of 1497, to make discoveries "in whatever part of the world heretofore unknown to all Christians." He landed somewhere on the northeast coast of the new world, and returned home after an absence of only three months. That is the origin of the regal title of England to the greatest part of North America.

As John Cabot was believed to have discovered Cipango and the Kingdom of the Great Khan, he found no difficulty in obtaining letters patent for a second expedition. Early in May, 1498, the bold navigator sailed again westward, leading a small fleet of five ships. In July following, news was received in London that one of the vessels had been forced by stress of weather to put into Ireland. That is the last that was ever heard of John Cabot's second and last voyage.

He had a son, called Sebastian, who arrogated to himself the merit of the achievement and lived and prospered, in England as well as in Spain, to an extreme old age, upon this mendacious boast. Nay, during several centuries nearly every one believed that he had been the sole discoverer of Labrador, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia and Canada, although authentic documents tend to prove that he was not even on board when these discoveries were made.¹

Regarding the second voyage, historians, as a rule, positively asserted that it had also been accomplished by Sebastian Cabot. Thus Biddle taught that John Cabot died shortly after the patent of February 1498 had been issued, and, besides, that so far from being a seaman, he only "followed the trade of merchandise;" George Bancroft asserted that John Cabot had made no voyage whatever under the second charter; while Mr. D'Avezac maintained that Sebastian took the place of the patentee, apparently owing to the latter's "unexpected death."

¹ Warden's Accounts of the Drapers' Company of London, from March 1st to April 9th, 1521.

It was in vain that attention was called repeatedly to a series of facts showing that John Cabot actually sailed in command of the second expedition ; as, for instance, that he was the sole grantee of the new letters patent ; that several times he explained in person to trustworthy witnesses his plans for the second voyage ; that two ambassadors, on July 23, 1498, each sent a dispatch stating that the " fleet had sailed with another Genoese like Columbus," and we know from preceding letters that it was their manner of designating John Cabot ; that when relating the mishap which had occurred to one of the ships, they added : " the Genoese *has continued his voyage,*" etc. What else could be desired to prove his having sailed and commanded the expedition in 1498 ? Yet, certain writers continued to repeat that Sebastian, not John, was the sole commander of the fleet ; and so lately as July last, the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, in an elaborate memoir, also stated that " before the expedition was ready John Cabot died, leaving the new adventure to be prosecuted by his son."

Nevertheless one historian at least could be found to maintain that John Cabot had been the real chief of the second as well as of the first expedition, although unable to say whether the bold navigator survived it or not. A Bristol compiler, however, recently argued at length that John Cabot and his companions had possibly been exterminated by Alonso de Hojeda. Unfortunately for that fine hypothesis, Hojeda remained permanently in Spain from June 11, 1496, until May 18, 1499 ; whilst Sebastian Cabot, who is alleged to have been on board, and must therefore have shared the pretended sad fate of his father, was yet flourishing in England sixty years afterwards.

Immediately upon John Cabot's arrival in London, August 10, 1497, he received from Henry VII. a gratuity of £10 " to enjoy himself," and on December 13 following " an anuel rent of £20, to be had and yerely perceyued from the feast of thanunciacion of our lady last passed during our pleasur of our custumes and subsidies comying and growing in our poort of Bristowe by thands of our custums there for the tyme beyng at Michelmas and Estre by even porcions."

According to the terms of this annuity, John Cabot was entitled to receive £10 September 29, 1497, April 15 and September 29, 1498, March 31 and September 29, 1499, respectively, if alive at those dates. Considering that the English Public Record Office contains the most complete collection of state archives in the world, the Rolls House was, naturally enough, the first source to consult to ascertain whether there were traces of payments made on account of

Cabot's pension, to whom and when. But ill-luck will have it that the records of the reign of Henry VII. are extremely scanty. State papers for the period scarcely exist, and the Issue Rolls cease between 1479 and 1597. The only substitutes are the Tellers' Rolls, but they lack details, not being final accounts, and contain no special dates for the entries. They are all classed merely under Easter and Michaelmas terms.

That series, together with the Warrants for Exchequer Issues, were nevertheless duly examined in 1895, for the years 1485-1520. The investigation, ably carried on by Mr. M. Oppenheim, to whom the historical student is indebted for such excellent works as *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy*, and *Naval Accounts of the Reign of Henry VII.*,¹ resulted in the discovery of an important document. This is a warrant of Henry VII., issued February 22, 1498, ordering that Cabot's annuity should be paid without further delay. It recites that having been "enformed that John Caboote being delaied of his payment because the customers of the poorte of Bristowe have no sufficient matier of discharge for their indempnitie to be yolden at their accompt before the Barons of the Eschequier," the king orders that several "tailles" of £10 each be levied and delivered to John Cabot.

Interesting as that document was in itself, it did not throw any light on the question which historians had most at heart to solve, as they knew already that John Cabot, in February 1498, had not yet sailed out on his second voyage. Only the accounts rendered by the collectors of the customs and subsidies of Henry VII. in the port of Bristol, for the last two or three years of the fifteenth century, could enlighten us as regards the question whether John Cabot had collected his pension after July 1498. But where was that class of documents to be found? Did they even still exist?

Last year one of those accounts came to light. It covered the period from September 29, 1497, until April 15, 1498, and showed that within that period, *i. e.*, between February 22, 1498, and Easter following, "John Calbot (*sic*) a Venetian, late of the town of Bristol," had received £10 of his annuity of £20 a year. This showed only that John Cabot was yet in England before April 15, 1498, a well-known fact. The document would have proved of some utility only if its editor had disclosed the place where the original was preserved, so as to enable others to initiate more thorough researches. But he thought fit to be as reticent on that point, as he has been regarding the books or book from which he took twenty-five important documents without a particle of acknowledgment.

¹ Publications of the Navy Records Society, London, 1896.

Historians were therefore again at sea. But a gleam of light appeared when, on the 24th of June last, the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava replied to the toast of Sir Michael Hicks-Beach, on the occasion of the Cabot quatercentenary in Bristol. His Lordship then announced that a hitherto unknown record relating to the now vindicated navigator had been discovered by Mr. Scott, of the British Museum. It was as follows :

“Bristoll Arthurus Kemys et Ricardus A. Meryk Collectores Custumarum et Sudsidiorum Regis ibidem a festo Sancti Michaelis Archangeli anno tredecimo Regis nunc usque idem festum Sancti Michaelis tunc proximo sequens reddunt computum de £1,226, 7s., 10d.

“Etiam in thesauro in una tallia pro Johanne Caboot, £20.”

“Bristol. Arthur Kemys and Richard a Meryk, collectors of the king's customs and subsidies there, from the feast of St. Michael the Archangel, in the thirteenth year [of the reign] of this king, to the same feast next ensuing, render this account of £1,226, 7s., 10d.

“In the treasury, in one tally, for John Cabot. . . . £20.

His Lordship added : “The passage I have quoted does not say much.” It meant on the contrary a great deal, as, to all appearances, the record was no less than the long-sought documentary proof not only that John Cabot had not been massacred by Hojeda, nor died at sea, or before the expedition set out, but that he had safely returned to England, even prior to September 29, 1498.

This announcement greatly whetted the appetite of inquirers, who were anxious to see it confirmed by other accounts of the kind, which at the same time could enable them to ascertain when the pension had ceased to be paid. The document was said to have been found “in the Westminster Chapter-house muniments, No. 12,243.” Those who live abroad imagined that this referred to the Westminster Chapter-house public records, now removed to the Public Record Office, Chancery Lane. But these, it seems, do not contain any evidence that John Cabot received anything on account of his pension after May 1498.²

At last there has just appeared in Bristol a work³ containing three records which apparently settle the main point at issue, viz. : the return of John Cabot to England.

The first document in that sumptuous and useful publication,

¹ London *Times*, June 25, 1897, p. 8.

² Better results might be expected perhaps from the Close Rolls, which contain varied and valuable information on nearly every subject.

³ *The Customs Roll of the Port of Bristol, A. D. 1496-1499. Translated from the original manuscript recently discovered at Westminster Abbey, by Edward Scott, M. A., Keeper of Manuscripts in the British Museum. With an Introduction relating to the entries of the Royal Pension paid to John Cabot, Navigator. By Alfred E. Hudd, F.S.A. Published by William George's Sons, Bristol, 1897. Large folio, 9 leaves, 3 of fac-similes.*

which, however, might have been more learnedly edited, is the Custom Roll from Michaelmas, 1496, to Michaelmas, 1497. John Cabot at the latter feast (September 29, 1497) had been in England seven weeks, after his return from his first voyage, yet his name does not figure in the account. This is owing to the fact that the pension, which had been made to date back from the feast of the Annunciation of that year (March 25, 1497), was granted only December 13, 1497, and did not pass the seals before January 28, 1498.

The second document is the Custom Roll from Michaelmas, 1497, to the same feast in the year following, viz. : from September 29, 1497, to September 29, 1498, and contains the full text of the record cited by Lord Dufferin. In a list of thirteen entries, Cabot occupies the fifth place, in these terms :

“ In th[esaurari]o¹ in vna tall[ia] p[ro] J[ohann]e Coboot (*sic*)... xx li.”

That is :

“ In the treasury in one tally for John Coboot..... £20.”

Strictly speaking, Cabot should have received then, not £20 only, but £30, as his pension dated from March 25, 1497, and, as we have just seen, the first payment did not and could not figure in the preceding account.

This document shows that two terms of Cabot's pension were paid ; but were they paid to him in person ? That is the gist of the question.

The collectors exhibit only as a voucher for their disbursement a “ tally.” But what was a tally in those days ? Externally it was, as everybody knows, a small piece of wood cleft into two parts, both cut with corresponding notches. One of the two sticks was kept by the debtor, the other was given to the creditor, as an evidence of the settlement. Madox² describes the tally as follows ; “ The summ of money which it bore was cutt in notches in the wood by the *Cutter* of the Tallies, and likewise written upon two sides of it by the *Writer* of the Tallies. . . . A notch of such a largeness signified M *l.* ; a notch of another largeness, C *l.* ; of another size, xx *l.* &c. It being thus divided or cleft, one part of it was called a Tally, the other a Countertally. And when these two parts came afterwards to be joind, if they were genuine, they fitted so exactly that they appeared evidently to be parts the one of the other.” This

¹ Perhaps the abbreviated form “ *In tho* ” should be spelled out “ *In thesauro*,” not “ *In thesaurario*.” If so, the meaning of the above entry might be : “ Paid in treasure (or cash) £20, attested by a tally to the account of John Cabot.” There are entries, I am told, in the Pipe Rolls in support of such an interpretation.

² *The History and Antiquities of the Exchequer of the Kings of England*, London, 1711, pp. 709-710.

statement is made on the authority of the *Dialogus de Scaccario*. Madox adds: "Tallies, as well those that were made out at the Exchequer as those which were used *in pais* [therefore in Bristol], were wont to have a superscription importing of what nature they were and for what purpose given."

This constituted, until it was completely abolished in 1826,¹ the common way of keeping government accounts in England, and, at a certain time, everywhere else in Europe. The old tallies were destroyed in 1834; so that there is now scarcely a specimen left of those archaeological slips of wood.

Withal, the term applied also to vouchers which were entirely of a different form. Thus, ordinarily, Mr. Oppenheim says,² in payment of an exchequer warrant, the money would be handed over and a receipt taken. That receipt, when customers settled their accounts, would momentarily be exchanged for a real tally in the Tally Office, then remitted in the Exchequer Chamber next door, and, although a mere slip of paper, was called likewise a "tally." Provincial receipts in writing went also frequently by that name.

Tallies were received as evidence in courts of justice, but they do not imply necessarily that the payee received his dues personally. We notice in those accounts payments made in 1496, 1497 and 1498 to Sir Thomas Lovell. Is it likely that this personage, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer, went every year to Bristol to collect £100 or £200 in person? Yet the entries where his name occurs all state, as in Cabot's case: "In thesaurario in una tallia." This leads one to believe that the amounts were received at Bristol by the agent of Sir Thomas Lovell. As to the wooden tally itself, we must infer that it was handed to the latter in person, by the king's chamberlain or treasurer, very much as if it had been what we call a cheque, drawn on Kemys and Meryk. If so, there is no reason why John Cabot might not have received his tallies in the same manner.

But during the summer of 1498 John Cabot was certainly at sea. May he not, before starting, have empowered an attorney to receive the tallies in London, with instructions to forward them to his wife, who then resided in Bristol? Better still, could not the king's chamberlain or treasurer have sent the tallies³ directly to Kemys and

¹ Tallies were abolished by the statute 23 Geo. III. c. 82, but not until "the death, surrender, forfeiture or removal" of the two chamberlains of the exchequer, and they did not resign till 1826.

² See also in his *Naval Accounts*, the note, page 8.

³ Tallies were not necessarily given one only at a time, it seems, for in the warrant of Henry VII., February 22, 1498, I read: "We wol and charge you that ye our Treasourer and Chambrelaines . . . do to be levied in due fourme ii several tailles every of them conteignyng x li . . . and the same taill or tailles . . . ye delyver unto the said John Cabote."

Meryk, to be remitted to and collected by herself during Cabot's absence, for the maintenance of the family? On the other hand, there are innumerable instances in the Tellers' Accounts of payments made "to A. B. for C. D." or "to A. B. by his servant C. D." Yet, as I am informed, that does not prove that the form was not sometimes omitted. It must also be stated that tallies could doubtless be discounted in London; yet, when paid to the broker by the customers, I assume that the entry in the account was made in the name of the original grantee.

It follows from what precedes, that the tallies mentioned in the Westminster Abbey documents do not in themselves prove the personal presence of John Cabot either in London or in Bristol at the dates specified in the accounts. They are only what lawyers would call *prima facie* evidence of the fact.

The third document, showing a similar payment made between September 29, 1498, and September 29, 1499, evidenced also by a tally, is liable to the same objection, which, however, is more than counterbalanced by the following facts:

The first Cabotian voyage lasted from the beginning of May to the first week in August, 1497, which shows that such a voyage could be accomplished in three months. Cabot, the second time, sailed from Bristol early in May, 1498. He might have been absent five months and yet have returned home in time to collect his pension before the end of September following. It is therefore nowise impossible that John Cabot should have collected his pension personally in Bristol, or received his tallies in person at the hands of the king's treasurer in London, before September 29, 1498, and in 1499.

Further, that was the time when he was expected back in England. Dr. Puebla, the Spanish ambassador, in a dispatch to Ferdinand and Isabella, undated, but sent from London in July, 1498, speaking of the sailing of the five ships of the second expedition, says: "Dicen que seran venidos para el Setiembre:—They say that they will be back in September (next)." Pedro de Ayala, the joint ambassador, in another dispatch, dated London, July 25, 1498, also writes: "Sperase seran venidos para el Setiembre:—It is hoped that they will have returned in September."

The Bristol accounts, examined by the light of these facts, strongly tend to prove, therefore, that John Cabot did return from his last voyage before September 29, 1498, and that he was still living after the latter date.

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